

Remains: A Singapore Journey
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REMAINS: A SINGAPORE JOURNEY • KOSTAS IKONOMOPOULOS •



☞ *To the Memory of my Father* ☞

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INTRODUCTION

This is the narrative of my journey through Singapore's graveyards, stations, oddities, cultural remnants and outlying islands. I have allowed myself to believe that this incomplete monograph on Singapore's necropolis is a rescue mission of sorts, an effort to document the places that will inevitably be destroyed in the city's never-ending development.

Even though I make no claim to sustained objectivity or academic rigor in the assembly of this work, I have tried to cite my sources so as to allow the reader to confirm or more extensively reconstruct both the tales of the dead and the theories of the living. More than any other single source, the National Library's online depository of Singapore and Malaya newspapers has been indispensable in tracking the lives and times of many of the city's illustrious inhabitants. Still, these pages were borne more out of burning interest than expertise and so I must accept and apologize in advance for the inaccuracies and misunderstandings that must have unavoidably crept in.

Although it is probable that some of the buildings or locations visited and here described will be altered or gone by the time of publication, I have not consciously altered, fictionalized or misrepresented any of them. I have attempted a high-resolution still shot of a mad forward dash. I hope my skill matches my intention.

K.I.

August 12, 2014

Coffee Hill

I decided to visit the Bukit Brown Cemetery before it was gutted, spoiled, divided and lessened. I took the bus and got off on Adam Road, between the Adam Flyover and Lornie Road. Incidentally, that is where the Singapore Island Country Club (SICC) is situated. The SICC contains the oldest golf course in the country. Next to the overhead bridge was a sign erected by the Land Transport Authority (LTA), giving notice of the exhumation of graves about to commence at Bukit Brown and Seh Ong Cemeteries; the land is required for the development of a new dual four-lane road. Although no mention of it is made, it is safe to assume that no part of the golf course will be affected.

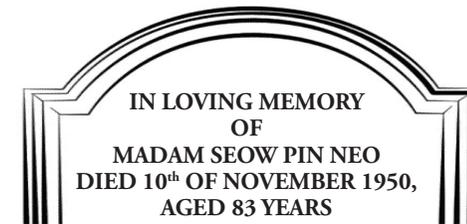
There were two more signs, right at the intersection past the bridge, put up by the National Heritage Board, which informed of things that were not there: the Sime Road Camp, previously a Royal Air Force headquarters, which became a Prisoner Of War (POW) camp during the Japanese occupation and the Syonan Jinja, a Shinto shrine built by the Japanese but destroyed once the occupation ended. The small hill, utterly overgrown with vegetation, hides a number of Chinese graves, ranging from the well-preserved to the crumbling and submerged beneath the green sea. I spent a couple of hours under the midday sun, going up and down that hill and photographing tombs and headstones. The first one I saw, practically next to the sidewalk, was half-buried. I read:



I thought, it makes sense that it is not tended to; her parents are probably dead by now. She died before growing up and having children of her own. Those who are buried young suffer the additional indignity of having their memorial disappear from view the fastest.

A number of graves near the road and the overhead bridge had their mounds and stonework cleared and maybe, even restored. Joss sticks were placed in bricks, the tiles were clean and unbroken, the inscriptions still colorful and the oval pictures of the deceased still unfaded with rain or time. Portrait photographs of the dead have a haunting quality to them. The old ones appear more benevolent or disinterested; but the young ones have a terrible intensity, as if still charged with all the energy of a life un-lived.

The further I penetrated into the hill, the more careful I had to be. My footing was not sure and I often found myself walking on someone's tombstone, barely visible under fallen branches and rotting vegetation. It was humid and I was soaked through and full of mosquito bites. Some tombs offered English inscriptions as well. I thought that having bilingual tombs was a bizarre conception. I stood in front of one of the larger and better tended memorials; there were red and green hues hanging from the headstone and the calligraphy of the engraved inscriptions was exquisite. On the side of the stone sarcophagus I read:

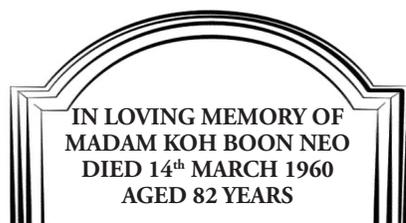


The names of her children and those of her grandchildren were inscribed too, in both languages. It was a while before I realized how odd it was to call a dead woman, *madam*.

Abandoned burial sites and cemeteries reclaimed by nature are eerie, ethereal and full of melancholy. The light penetrates the dense foliage and illuminates a collection of broken tombstones, strangled by roots and shadowed by leaves. Ant-eaten branches and mould are the snowflakes of time, blanketing

the hill with their heavy silence. Some of the tombs had stone lion-guards flanking them and I noticed one stone lion that had a child's marbles for eyes, the terrible inspiration guaranteeing life-likeness and an impression of alertness. One tomb, devoured by the hill and only partially regurgitated, was protected by a small iron garden gate; but the gate was slightly open and it stood pointlessly alone, with no fence or wall on either side of it.

I tried to be systematic in my wandering, first trying to zigzag up and down the hill and then trying to walk in ever widening circles, but I soon gave up. Eventually, I came upon another cleared and well preserved tomb and this one read:



I saw the names of her children and grandchildren inscribed as well and they all had the last name of *Ong*, just like the children and grandchildren of the other madam Neo, whose grave I had seen but minutes ago. The two women, then, had probably married brothers. When I looked at my photographs later, I located one tomb that seemed to belong to one of the Ong brothers, but it was smaller and humbler and without any references to his loving memory; it was without any English inscriptions at all. It was strange. Most other couples in the cemetery were buried next to each other and had twin headstones. I wonder what lies behind the enigma of this dispersion of the Ong and Neo families.

Crossing over the bridge onto the other side, I entered the *affected zone*, the part of the burial grounds that is needed for the new road. The LTA has marked the affected graves with narrow wooden pickets. They are numbered in red paint. With exhumation about to begin, the LTA has listed the names of the interred, so that their descendants or next-of-kin can confirm if their ancestors will have to be moved and then claim them. Some of the names on the tombstones have faded and cannot be read. Exhumation and cremation activities related to the claimed tombs, however, will proceed according to a pretty well-defined protocol, described on the LTA's final notice to the claimants.

An exhumation contractor will be engaged. The exhumation in each individual grave will be carried out under the supervision of an LTA officer. Remains will be cremated individually and the ashes will be stored at a government columbarium. The name and date of death will be inscribed in a plaque to be placed above the urn. Finally, no charge to next-of-kin will be made for this service, unless family members wish to keep the remains in a place of their own choosing, in which case, they will naturally bear that cost. The nameless and the unclaimed will also be cremated individually and their ashes kept, but within three years and if a name is not found for them, their ashes will be scattered at sea.

There are a few private residences on that side of Adam Road and the tombstones there are almost leaning on the outer walls of the compound. The earth is depressed and overgrown there, and it was hard walking around and taking photographs. I felt like I was trespassing on multiple levels. One of the larger and better kept tombs housed a couple. I approached and read:



followed by the dates of their deaths and how old they were when they died. Choon Neo outlived her husband by more than twenty years, as is often the case. Men almost never outlive their wives, unless their deaths are violent and premature. I found myself wishing I knew the histories of these families and I suppose if I truly applied myself, I could learn a lot about a lot of them, but to what end? After my visit to Bukit Brown, I briefly flirted with the idea of somehow getting involved, of volunteering, or attaching my name to something, maybe the clearing of some gravesites or the historical tours. I never found a worthier cause in Singapore. For the first time in three years, I could see what makes Singapore a nation: these stories, these headstones, these soon-to-be scattered ashes. It is near inconceivable that on an island that is fifty percent parks and nature reserves, a new highway *has got* to go through and over possibly the single largest Chinese cemetery outside China and one of the very few remaining on the island. But sentimentality is not a valuable commodity

in these latitudes. Apologies, Horatius: a man can die best defending the ashes of his fathers, but financial growth is better achieved by developing dual lane highways.

Leaving the smaller, outlying graveyards, I walked towards the main entrance of Bukit Brown. On Lorong Halwa, hanging from the road sign, was a banner erected by the LTA, pointing towards the gate and proclaiming that was where REGISTRATION FOR EXHUMATION was happening. I thought this was a phenomenal turn of phrase, a title someone would expect to find on a black metal album cover or the front page of a Stanislaw Lem novel. But there it was: bureaucracy on steroids, without a trace of self-conscious irony.

Of course, no registration activities were taking place on the Saturday, when I walked past the cemetery gates. Two old guards sat lounging and smoking on *chaises longues*. I wandered alone for a while, but then attached myself to the tail-end of an organized tour. The guide was knowledgeable and eloquently explained the histories of various tombs. Interment at Bukit Brown ceased at some point in the 1970s and the place was left to the elements. In 2011, the Bukit Brown Cemetery Documentation Project began in earnest, following the LTA's announcement regarding the construction of a highway that would affect about five thousand graves. A working committee staffed by researchers and local academics was formed to carry out this project in a comprehensive manner. The LTA and the Urban Redevelopment Authority got involved in establishing a framework for this documentation process. This, I think, is equivalent to a team of surgeons painstakingly documenting the benefits of having legs and presenting them to a patient whose legs they have just amputated. Still, it is better that all this history be somehow preserved, even if it is in this manner of substituting stones and land and bones with photographs and archives. It would be more fitting to call this documentation project, a *memory project*. This is what everything of intangible value could be called in Singapore; all else is infrastructure.

I thought the tour was moving at a faster pace than I desired. I lagged behind. I thought I had lost them when, around a bend, I found the group immobilized and mesmerized by the sight of a black stallion. The rider was a middle-aged woman. She sounded English. After agreeing to be repeatedly

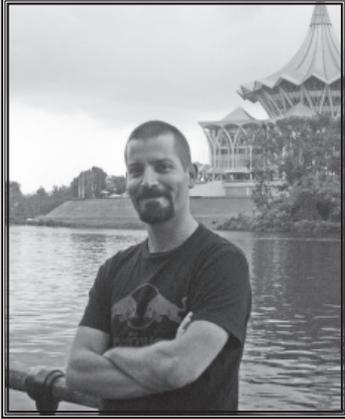
photographed, she urged the horse onwards and the fifteen or so people of the tour shifted their focus, once more, to the dead and their stories.

The current President's mother is buried in Bukit Brown and her tombstone is dominated by a cross. Multiple religious beliefs are represented in the cemetery, the only common thread uniting the dead being that they all had Chinese ancestry. A large percentage of graves cover Peranakans and those graves seem to be the most adorned and noteworthy, since in life, those Chinese of the Straits were necessary and successful. Ironically, according to the guide, if there are no English inscriptions on their tombstones, it is hard to find some of the living relatives of these people because some of their descendants cannot read Chinese. I suppose this is one of the solid benefits of the Documentation Project: making it possible for people to go see where their forefathers are buried, even at the eleventh hour. It seems a bittersweet deal to me, discovering the stones covering your ancestor, only to have them disappear shortly thereafter.

Tombs reflect the predilections of the living more than they reflect those of the dead, but it is still possible to extensively reconstruct a society's socio-economic order and hierarchy, based on where and how the dead are buried. The spectrum extends from mass and unmarked graves to elaborate mausolea. In general terms, there is great restraint and elegance exhibited throughout Bukit Brown. The vast majority of tombs are simply adorned, with headstones solemnly carved and decorative motifs kept to a minimum. I did, however, get to examine some of the more elaborate memorials.

The twin graves of Tok Cheng Tuan and his wife Oon Tuan Cheng were marked for removal. They occupy a large plot and are unusual in that they are flanked not just by eagles and jade maidens, but by two large stone benches, inviting the passerby to sit and *memento mori*. Both headstones feature large black and white photographs of the deceased. The man's picture is faded, but one can still see he was wearing a tuxedo when he posed. His wife is dressed in nyonya costume. The headstones, the decorative shoulders and the two sarcophagi are intricately carved, not just with abstract motifs but with figures engaged in various activities in what I assume to be moral or religious parables. I was told that, luckily enough, the headstones and the benches will be preserved after exhumation and removal. They will be donated to the Peranakan Museum after that.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Born in Greece in 1976. Kostas studied at Athens University and after being granted a state scholarship, he did postgraduate studies in Philosophy at the Manchester Metropolitan University. After completing his studies, he spent time with an NGO; fundraised in Scandinavia and did Development Work in a South African township for six months.

In late 2001, he returned to Greece to do his National Service. In 2003, he was in China, and spent seven years working mostly as a Project Manager, first for a small trading and outsourcing firm and then for a gaming multinational. In 2010, he moved to Singapore, where he has lived ever since, being employed in the science publishing field.

Two years ago, he became a Singapore Permanent Resident. Married and with a daughter, he has travelled quite extensively in the last 15 years, mostly in East and Southeast Asia. He has an enduring interest in cultural preservation, colonial architecture, derelict monuments and urban decay. *Remains* is his first book.